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The Right Thing to Do

Basic Readings in Moral Philosophy

SIXTH EDITION

Edited by

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and

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THE RIGHT THING TO DO, SIXTH EDITION

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CHAPTER 7

The Categorical Imperative

Immanuel Kant

Immanuel Kant, whom many regard as the greatest modern philosopher, led an uneventful life. He never traveled more than a few miles from Königsberg, East Prussia, where he was born in 1724. He was a popular professor in the local university and a much-sought-after dinner guest. He was also known for his regular habits: A bachelor, he arose each morning at 4 A.M., prepared his lectures, taught from 7 A.M. until noon, read until 4 P.M., took a walk, had dinner, and wrote until bedtime. He repeated this routine every day for years. Yet, despite his quiet habits, on the day he was buried in 1804, thousands of people followed his coffin down the street, and the bells of all the churches tolled.

Kant's unorthodox views on religion did cause some controversy. However, Kant was not an atheist. He was from a family of Pietists, who distrusted organized religion. In his later years, when he was rector of the university, it was his duty to lead the faculty procession to the university chapel for religious services; and he would, but, upon reaching the chapel, he would stand aside and not enter. In 1786, having become the most famous philosopher in Germany, and having argued that God's existence cannot be proven, Kant was ordered to publish nothing more on the subject.

Today, "Kant scholarship" is an academic specialty unto itself; many scholars spend their whole lives trying to understand what Kant wrote, and every year new books appear defending new interpretations of his philosophy. The multitude of interpretations is partly due to the richness of Kant's thought. But it is also due to the fact that Kant was an exceedingly obscure writer.

Excerpted from Immanuel Kant, "Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals" (1785), in *The Critique of Practical Reason and Other Writings in Moral Philosophy*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), pp. 73-74, 80-83, 86-87. Reprinted by permission of the Estate of Lewis White Beck.

Kant believed that morality can be summed up in one ultimate principle, the Categorical Imperative. According to the Categorical Imperative, to act morally is to act from motives that everyone, everywhere could live by.

The following selection is from Kant's *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, the most accessible presentation of his ethical theory.

All imperatives command either hypothetically or categorically. . . . The hypothetical imperative . . . says only that the action is good to some purpose, possible or actual. . . . The categorical imperative, which declares the action to be of itself objectively necessary without making any reference to a purpose, i.e., without having any other end, holds as an apodictical (practical) principle. . . .

If I think of a hypothetical imperative as such, I do not know what it will contain until the condition is stated [under which it is an imperative]. But if I think of a categorical imperative, I know immediately what it contains. For since the imperative contains besides the law only the necessity of the maxim of acting in accordance with this law, while the law contains no condition to which it is restricted, there is nothing remaining in it except the universality of law as such to which the maxim of the action should conform; and in effect this conformity alone is represented as necessary by the imperative.

There is, therefore, only one categorical imperative. It is: Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

Now if all imperatives of duty can be derived from this one imperative as a principle, we can at least show what we understand by the concept of duty and what it means, even though it remain undecided whether that which is called duty is an empty concept or not.

The universality of law according to which effects are produced constitutes what is properly called nature in the most general sense (as to form), i.e., the existence of things so far as it is determined by universal laws. [By analogy], then, the universal imperative of duty can be expressed as follows: Act as though the maxim of your action were by your will to become a universal law of nature.

We shall now enumerate some duties. . . .

1. A man who is reduced to despair by a series of evils feels a weariness with life but is still in possession of his reason sufficiently

to ask whether it would not be contrary to his duty to himself to take his own life. Now he asks whether the maxim of his action could become a universal law of nature. His maxim, however, is: For love of myself, I make it my principle to shorten my life when by a longer duration it threatens more evil than satisfaction. But it is questionable whether this principle of self-love could become a universal law of nature. One immediately sees a contradiction in a system of nature, whose law would be to destroy life by the feeling whose special office is to impel the improvement of life. In this case it would not exist as nature; hence that maxim cannot obtain as a law of nature, and thus it wholly contradicts the supreme principle of all duty.

2. Another man finds himself forced by need to borrow money. He well knows that he will not be able to repay it, but he also sees that nothing will be loaned him if he does not firmly promise to repay it at a certain time. He desires to make such a promise, but he has enough conscience to ask himself whether it is not improper and opposed to duty to relieve his distress in such a way. Now, assuming he does decide to do so, the maxim of his action would be as follows: When I believe myself to be in need of money, I will borrow money and promise to repay it, although I know I shall never do so. Now this principle of self-love or of his own benefit may very well be compatible with his whole future welfare, but the question is whether it is right. He changes the pretension of self-love into a universal law and then puts the question: How would it be if my maxim became a universal law? He immediately sees that it could never hold as a universal law of nature and be consistent with itself; rather it must necessarily contradict itself. For the universality of a law which says that anyone who believes himself to be in need could promise what he pleased with the intention of not fulfilling it would make the promise itself and the end to be accomplished by it impossible; no one would believe what was promised to him but would only laugh at any such assertion as vain pretense.

3. A third finds in himself a talent which could, by means of some cultivation, make him in many respects a useful man. But he finds himself in comfortable circumstances and prefers indulgence in pleasure to troubling himself with broadening and improving his fortunate natural gifts. Now, however, let him ask whether his maxim of neglecting his gifts, besides agreeing with his propensity to idle amusement, agrees also with what is called duty. He sees that a system of nature could indeed exist in accordance with such a law, even though man (like the inhabitants of the South Sea Islands) should

let his talents rust and resolve to devote his life merely to idleness, indulgence, and propagation—in a word, to pleasure. But he cannot possibly will that this should become a universal law of nature or that it should be implanted in us by a natural instinct. For, as a rational being, he necessarily wills that all his faculties should be developed, inasmuch as they are given to him for all sorts of possible purposes.

4. A fourth man, for whom things are going well, sees that others (whom he could help) have to struggle with great hardships, and he asks, "What concern of mine is it? Let each one be as happy as heaven wills, or as he can make himself; I will not take anything from him or even envy him; but to his welfare or to his assistance in time of need I have no desire to contribute." If such a way of thinking were a universal law of nature, certainly the human race could exist, and without doubt even better than in a state where everyone talks of sympathy and good will or even exerts himself occasionally to practice them while, on the other hand, he cheats when he can and betrays or otherwise violates the rights of man. Now although it is possible that a universal law of nature according to that maxim could exist, it is nevertheless impossible to will that such a principle should hold everywhere as a law of nature. For a will which resolved this would conflict with itself, since instances can often arise in which he would need the love and sympathy of others, and in which he would have robbed himself, by such a law of nature springing from his own will, of all hope of the aid he desires.

The foregoing are a few of the many actual duties, or at least of duties we hold to be actual, whose derivation from the one stated principle is clear. We must be able to will that a maxim of our action become a universal law; this is the canon of the moral estimation of our action generally. Some actions are of such a nature that their maxim cannot even be *thought* as a universal law of nature without contradiction, far from it being possible that one could will that it should be such. In others this internal impossibility is not found though it is still impossible to *will* that their maxim should be raised to the universality of a law of nature, because such a will would contradict itself. We easily see that the former maxim conflicts with the stricter or narrower (imprescriptable) duty, the latter with broader (meritorious) duty. Thus all duties, so far as the kind of obligation (not the object of their action) is concerned, have been completely exhibited by these examples in their dependence on the one principle. . . .